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## THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE OPEN FORUM TO DEMOCRACY IN RELIGION

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### ABSTRACT

The open forum is a direct result of the eagerness of the church to "reach the masses." Three of the pioneer organizations of the forum—at Cooper Union, in the Church of the Ascension, and at Ford Hall—were all inspired by the ideals of the church. The purpose of the forum is to give an opportunity for open discussion, where objections may be raised as well as positions defined. The result has been to jar church people out of their complacency, to modify unintelligent radicalism, and to stimulate thinking and reading. Dogmatism is immediately checked. No ecclesiastical or other conditions are prescribed for participation in the discussion. Those who have been alienated from the church find that religion, like other human interests, is progressing and is dealing with real issues. A wider sense of brotherhood is developed. A new community interest is aroused. Brief descriptions of typical experiments reinforce the foregoing points.

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The open forum brings together all kinds of serious-minded people at stated times for the purpose of discussing the issues of life under the leadership of recognized experts who stand ready to meet the challenge of any person in the audience who wishes to cross-examine them. The open forum is utterly democratic, but never chaotic. It guarantees a freedom of discussion which neither the speaker nor the audience may monopolize or subvert.

The motto of the open forum is "Let there be light!" The forum generates more light and less heat than any other form of public discussion. Even applied science in the material realm has not yet discovered how to give us light without heat.

Although the modern forum idea is of very recent origin, it has quickly spread throughout the United States and Canada until now forums are numbered by the hundred.

To those who are interested in religion let it be noted that this new instrument for democracy is an outgrowth of the life of the church, although it must be admitted that it has taken the church some time to recognize its own child. But the day of distrust and suspicion on the part of the church has given place to a time of eager inquiry, earnest appreciation, and active co-operation. It was the Rev. Charles E. Jefferson, D.D., of the Broadway Tabernacle Church, New York City, who some time ago prophesied that within a few years the forum would be as necessary an adjunct of the city church as are the Sunday-school and the prayer meeting today.

The open forum came as an aftermath of that great urge of the Protestant church in America to reach the masses. Thirty years ago and more, "How to Reach the Masses" was the great hue and cry heard on every religious convention platform with interminable repercussions from our pulpits all over the land. Just about the time, years later, when we woke up to the fact that our effort to reach the masses was a continuing failure and we had begun to grow very anxious as to what the masses would soon be doing to us, one or two bold spirits within the church proceeded to do the obvious thing: they quit talking in the church about the masses and went out to the masses and talked to them. That was the beginning of the modern forum idea.

The late Mr. Charles Sprague Smith at Cooper Union, New York City, Dr. Percy S. Grant of the Church of the Ascension on lower Fifth Avenue, New York City, and the writer in his work on Sunday evenings at Ford Hall in Boston, were the first to develop the technique and to practice the spirit of the forum as it is now conceived. At least they were the first to give a large, outstanding, and permanent exhibit of what an open forum can be and do. All three of these

enterprises owed their existence to the life and inspiration of the church. Charles Sprague Smith was the son of a minister, Dr. Grant used his church to father and mother the infant forum, and it was the Boston Baptist Social Union that gave me my opportunity to demonstrate what could be done in Boston.

In all three of these ventures the driving force was the desperate need of finding some way to bridge the widening chasm between the well-meaning people within the churches and the good folks outside. It is doubtful if any one of us had at the start any clear vision of the open forum as it is conceived today.

As we look back over the work of fourteen seasons at Ford Hall, our success in interesting the masses is unmistakable. Not even our severest critic would gainsay that. And to tell the story of the effect of these open-forum meetings on the masses of Boston who have frequented Ford Hall would be to write a romance. Many experts in social work have pronounced this method the soundest and most successful process of Americanization that they have witnessed—a process which awakens the smug and somnolent native just as surely as it informs and molds the confused and uncouth foreigner.

But the purpose of this paper draws me away from this absorbing side of the story to another phase of the subject. What contribution does this open-forum idea make to democracy in religion? Perhaps there is even more significance in the answer that can be made to that question.

Let me say first of all with reference to this single forum at Ford Hall, after fourteen years of the most intimate acquaintance with its work and the results flowing from it, that the reaction on the life of the churches in Boston is in itself worth all these meetings have cost, if they have accomplished nothing else. Greater Boston now has twenty-five or more forums, and churches and church people are responsible for a generous

share of them. Not only have Protestant churches taken up readily this method of discussing vital issues with the average man and woman, regardless of church connections, but the Roman Catholic church and the Jewish synagogue are also alert in taking advantage of this democratic method of discussing everything that interests the public mind.

The Common Cause Forum, conducted under the auspices of the Roman Catholic church every Sunday evening during the season in the Franklin Union Hall in the city of Boston, would be a very interesting study in itself. There you would find twelve hundred people in the most serious frame of mind, listening to the pros and cons of religion, the church, democracy, education, and every other vital topic, as set forth not only by responsible lay leaders of the church, but also as challenged, contradicted, and defied by some of the keenest young radicals this day of unrest has produced. Such an extraordinary spectacle was never witnessed before the coming of the forum idea, but it is a commonplace now at the Franklin Union after about ten years of continuous operation. This forum under Catholic auspices goes much farther in the democratic discussion of religious questions than we at Ford Hall, under Baptist auspices, think is wise and fitting.

In one Jewish synagogue in Boston some years ago the forum for the entire season was given over to the discussion of distinctly Jewish questions with a large audience of Jewish young people every Sunday night. The older men of the synagogue looked on in amazement and some of them in fear and trembling as they saw the young people gathering by the hundreds to discuss freely and frankly everything of interest to serious-minded Jews.

But the establishment of forums under religious auspices, significant and interesting as that may be, was not the only mark made upon the religious life of the city by the Sunday evening meetings at Ford Hall. Neither would I lay special stress upon the forum method of discussion introduced into

various adult Bible classes. Undoubtedly the greatest effect produced by the forum on the religious life of Boston is to be found in a changed state of mind among church people. They have been aroused and quickened, jarred and irritated, and set to thinking and reading as to the relation of religion to the whole realm of life. Even those who have never wandered into a forum meeting have not escaped its lessons as set forth in the daily press, sometimes in startling headlines. The meeting at Ford Hall, Sunday night, is often the topic of the week in store and factory, in office and boarding-house. While only a thousand or twelve hundred people may have participated directly in the meeting, perhaps a hundred thousand, some of them scattered all over New England, have eagerly watched for the report, especially so when some ticklish subject was up for discussion or some unusually striking personality took the platform.

If true religion is to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly, as the prophet Micah had it, then the forums everywhere are democratizing the discussion of religion with remarkable success. Justice is the passionate desire of these audiences everywhere, and the note of kindness in any address always meets a quick and warm response. And while many an ardent propagandist, both conservative and radical, comes to the forum in a cock-sure spirit, he often goes away much chastened and subdued. And, oftener than not, the humbling dose he needs is administered by the audience rather than by the appointed speaker of the hour.

While it is a general forum principle to avoid all strictly sectarian and partisan discussions, one must have a very narrow conception of religion not to see that a live forum is shot through and through with a powerful religious dynamic. And the entire procedure and the dominant spirit are democratic. While no topic is sacrosanct to a well-trained forum audience, it is clearly recognized that some topics are futile.

And as to the kinds of people who may be permitted to share in the discussion, there is no limit save one which is self-operating. The frivolous-minded person absents himself. The individual who prefers a movie, a dance, or a flirtation to the earnest, serious temper of the forum goes to his own place. But everybody else in the community is there or is represented by one or more of his kind. All classes, cliques, and creeds are present in the model forum.

Here you have a thoroughly democratic audience—Jew, Catholic, Protestant, unbeliever, native and foreigner, employer and employee, student and mechanic, radical and conservative, rich and poor, coming together for one and the same purpose, keen to listen, eager to answer back. The fundamentals of life, individual and collective, are seriously discussed in a manner that gives everyone his right to be heard and no one a privilege to monopolize the discussion. Everything that touches life is pertinent and the topic set for discussion invariably has its moral and spiritual implications. This is “democracy in religion” in action. Such a beacon light burning in any community for a period of years cannot fail to throw its beams into every nook and corner where religious-minded people gather, while its effect on the great throngs who are churchless and yet hungering and thirsting is dramatic and pathetic to a degree.

Let me give one example. Boston, like every great city, has a considerable Jewish population. Eighty per cent of the Jewish young people are unattached to the synagogue, either orthodox or liberal. They are, for the most part, born idealists and extraordinarily alert mentally. They cannot be drawn into any kind of a religious service, so-called. They will have none of it. But it would be difficult to keep them away from a real community forum run without bias and having no axes to grind. From the first night it threw open its doors, all through its fourteen seasons, the Ford Hall forum in Boston has had in its audience a large contingent of these young

Jews. They come of course to discuss economic, social, civil, and industrial questions, but in connection with this discussion and through other topics presented in course, they find themselves facing the most serious personal questions of life. Its effect on them may be best judged by a friendly comment from Rabbi Harry Levi, of the liberal Jewish synagogue on Commonwealth Avenue, who remarked that the Ford Hall forum was a half-way house to Temple Israel for these young Jews. Thus many of these young people are saved from indifference, agnosticism, or atheism to a modern democratic interpretation of the religion of their fathers.

And other men and women of Christian antecedents, who long since have become estranged from the church in which they were brought up, find themselves influenced by the forum discussions to make a fresh evaluation of the church. They are often greatly surprised to note that the church, too, has grown and progressed like themselves since the days when they were last in touch with its activities. I well remember the head mechanic on one of our steam railroads, who had gotten entirely out of patience with churches in general, coming to me privately at the close of a forum meeting where he had been a regular attendant and asking me very earnestly where he could get a manual of the church in which he had been trained; he wanted to study afresh the up-to-date pronouncement of the creedless church on which he had turned his back ten years before.

There are still others attending forum meetings, and in large numbers, who will in all probability never find their way back into church membership. Poor substitute indeed as the forum is for a church, it seems to bring to these individuals the inspiration, guidance, and fellowship which they crave and which they will not or cannot find in any church.

It is no small contribution to democratic religion, I would judge, when innumerable earnest, serious-minded souls find in the forum, or through it, a means of encouraging and



cultivating a sense of brotherhood based on justice, mercy, and humility. I have seen week after week in forum meetings a heterogeneous, cosmopolitan crowd, representing every prejudice and antagonism known to our American life, come to a unity of feeling, a self-forgetfulness, a high pitch of enthusiasm over a mutual discussion of some topic of the most vital concern. This is a process of forming public opinion under the power of emotion, something that Benjamin Kidd declares to be of the very first importance for these days. When that discussion deals with the relations of men to one another and with the relation of man to the universe, which is the range of forum topics, it is shot through and through with religion. And what could be more truly democratic than the forum method of discussion, which exalts the expert, hears the voice of the people, and snuffs out the irrepressible talking nuisance?

While the forum is no proper substitute for the church, even though some people outside the church have found it adequate for that purpose, it is unmistakably a most fitting and successful substitute for a worn-out, brokendown, perfunctory Sunday evening service. It is right here, doubtless, that the forum makes its most direct and manifest contribution to democracy in religion. The forum has already salvaged many a Sunday night service to the great blessing of the community and to the distinct advantage of the church undertaking such a broad and generous service for its neighborhood.

There are many downtown churches in cities all over the land where they do well if they can muster an attendance of one hundred on Sunday evenings, even though the auditorium may easily accommodate five or ten times that number. That was the case with a church I have in mind. It was in the heart of the downtown district in a city that numbered its inhabitants by the hundred thousand. Less than seventy-five people would file into the aisles of this cathedral-like auditorium on Sunday evenings, although the very same

preacher would be heard by several hundred in that same church on the morning of the same day.

But it was entirely different when the forum got well under way, and it was directed and presided over by this same preacher. There were not seats enough in the auditorium to accommodate the people who desired to attend. They came from all over the city and from miles around. The audiences exceeded a thousand every Sunday night. Two hundred extra seats had to be brought in, and then people sat all over the pulpit stairs and stood behind the choir-loft and out in the vestibule, where they could hear but not see. And this continued for five years, the interest and attendance and support growing stronger every year.

There came to these forum meetings socialists and atheists who had not darkened a church door in twenty-five years, a multimillionaire was a frequent attendant, country folk drove in from the towns outside the city, Jews and Catholics were attracted even though the meeting was held in a Protestant church building, church members from the morning congregation, who never before had gone to meeting Sunday evenings, were there—and the program lasted two hours and a half, and then it was too short for most of them. Remember this went on for five years, every Sunday night during the winter season. And it was a weakness in the church that resulted in a change of leadership which cut the forum off at the time of its maximum strength.

The meetings of this forum were opened with prayer and closed with a benediction. Meeting in a church and led by a minister, the churchly environment was unescapable. And yet it was a meeting quite apart from the church, where no axes were ground, no propaganda declared, no overlordship exercised. Some of the most outstanding men and women of the country brought their messages to these people. Discussion proceeded in true forum fashion. Many were amazed to see men speaking from a church platform submitting

themselves to cross-examination by the audience. Courteous but critical challenges were hurled from the floor and no one went to sleep or begged to have the time shortened, for these people were discussing the serious affairs of present-day living and they were all in dead earnest about it. They were asking what is just and they were trying hard to be merciful toward an opponent, and they often went out in a more humble frame of mind.

This recital is but an outline of what one forum did in a church in a great city. It could be duplicated again and again, going each time to a different part of the country. Such a meeting is democracy in religion, or at least one phase of it, if I have not been misled as an American citizen or bamboozled by my religious instructors. And yet I know so-called 100 per cent Americans who deprecate a popular discussion of critical questions and I am well acquainted with religious leaders who insist that our present-day troubles have nothing whatever to do with religion. Maybe that is what is the matter with things after all. But if the churches won't discuss these matters and the forums ought not to do so, how are we ever going to get the troubles and religion within sight of each other?

As I write I am thinking of an able, well-seasoned minister with a rich and powerful congregation who, not feeling that the time of his crucifixion is yet at hand, has agreed with his governing board in the church that for the next three months he will not preach on any subject later than the Victorian age. Is that what might be called plutocracy in religion? Whatever it may be, it is far removed from the democracy which the forum injects into religion.

In another city in the Middle West an almost defunct Sunday evening service was immediately transformed into a spiritual dynamo whose light is seen and power felt in every corner of the city among all classes of people. Hundreds were turned away all through a long first season. Again it was a

downtown church that had lost touch with the people, having an evening congregation of less than seventy-five. Now the only difficulty is how wisely to direct and utilize the tremendous power which has been generated.

It isn't a vaudeville performance, nor a motion-picture melodrama, nor a band concert, no, not even a stereopticon that furnishes the lure that draws the crowd to forum meetings. It is life, as we live it today, with all its problems and heart-aches, with all its lure and significance, unfolded by leading men and women who themselves have lived and thought in a large way, with all the marvelous reactions that come from hundreds of everyday men and women in the audience—it is this that attracts and holds the forum crowds. A live forum is as engaging as a vaudeville performance; something unexpected happening all the time. It is as absorbing as a motion picture, life speaking directly to you; it is as stirring as a band concert, putting your emotions athrill; and it is as true to life as the pictures from the stereopticon, for every participant in the audience gives you an instantaneous etching from real life. When doctrine, sectarianism, the life of two thousand years ago, a threadbare evangelism, a stereotyped service, a loosely thrown together address, fail to attract the multitudes, don't despair of the multitude. When the gospel fails to appeal, it might not be unreasonable to assume first that perhaps the gospel has suffered at our hands or that we have lost the ability to present it. At all events, it does not necessarily follow that some other way than our way is surely the wrong way.

Someone, doubtless, is saying to himself that the crowds often follow after strange gods. A crowd in itself is no evidence that one is on the right track. True enough, just as certainly as empty seats are hopelessly unresponsive. But there is this to be said about a forum crowd: It is not only most wary and elusive, hard to get and harder to hold, but the forum crowd is not the mass of the people at all. I wish

with all my heart it were. No, no, a forum audience is only the cream skimmed off the top of the crowd. It includes every class and kind, but only the most thoughtful individuals, the most earnest and devoted representatives of the different groups in the city. The great body of the rank and file in almost every class is too inert to respond to the attraction of serious discussion of public matters. It would rather be amused with predigested motion-picture pap, or go on a lark, or loll through the evening, or soak up a Sunday newspaper. No, don't think for a moment that the forum will draw the dregs either from the upper or the lower classes. Just as the stated church services appeal to only a small proportion of those who count themselves in the fold, so the forum draws to itself only a small proportion of either church people or of those outside the church.

The forum method of discussion, following the message by the appointed speaker, is spreading far and wide, even where the forum name is never attached to it. Nowhere is it more often brought into use than in religious meetings. The prayer meeting, the Bible study class, the young people's meeting, the evening preaching service, and here and there even the Sunday morning service have been forumized to the extent that the people in attendance have the privilege of cross-examining the speaker by the question method. An able and successful pastor in New England, of long experience, not only introduced the full-fledged forum into his church activities, but also forumized nearly every meeting held under the auspices of the church. Where the forum discussion has followed the Sunday morning service it has generally been the custom to adjourn after the benediction to another room where those who cared to remain were free to question the pastor on the subject of his sermon.

While it must be apparent to anyone that a service for worship and inspiration might easily be spoiled by introducing an element of controversy, it must also be admitted that when

the preacher is exercising the function of the teacher and giving instruction to his flock, questioning on the part of his hearers might follow very fittingly and profitably.

This last winter the open forum idea was planted in the midst of the activities of a church with which I have been connected all my life. It is a church made famous in the past by a great ministry. That era closed twenty-five years ago. Since then the environment of the church has completely changed. The once fashionable residential section of the city is now a boarding- and lodging-house district. There are three times as many people in the district as in the olden days, but they do not come to our church nor go to any church in large numbers, although a goodly proportion of them are white people of American or Canadian stock and Protestant in their leanings. The same gospel which used to fill our fine church auditorium has since come perilously near emptying it. Our service is almost identically what it was a quarter of a century and more ago. Our activities are precisely what they were forty years ago: two services on Sunday, Bible school, Friday night prayer meeting, young people's meeting, the Benevolent Circle and the women's missionary meeting, with the church sociable once a month—all preserved intact just as they were originally planned.

But with the present pastor there came two years ago a new spirit and energy. He has the united support of all the old-timers and the love and devotion of a constantly widening circle of folks all through our community. He wouldn't accept the call of the church until he had assured himself that it was willing to go to some lengths to reach and serve the unchurched people of that neighborhood through whatever methods might be necessary. On his own initiative, without a suggestion from me, he inaugurated an open forum every Wednesday night in the vestry. And he made it an open forum for the neighborhood, not another service of the church. It was so satisfactory that, having been begun on a monthly basis, it

was soon made semi-monthly, and then weekly. It gripped the neighborhood as had nothing else we had done in a long time. It brought into the vestry on Wednesday nights as great a variety of human beings as we have at Ford Hall and they found there the same friendly, tolerant, helpful spirit, with no traps set to catch them, no pressure brought to bear, no smug condescension, but a virile, frank, hearty fellowship and an eager disposition to learn something from the other fellow.

Not only was this little forum with its weekly attendance of two hundred and more a pronounced success from every point of view and a joy and a blessing to those who attended without ever approaching the church at any other time, but every activity of the church itself began to take on new life. The Sunday evening service is larger than it was in the palmiest days of the old régime, and the morning attendance grows steadily. A recent sociable in the vestry had more people in attendance than the oldest member could remember having seen at any similar gathering in the church. The credit for all this is by no means due to the forum. Without our young pastor we should be lost. But I am quite sure he would say that he would now feel lost without the forum activity. This forum is injecting the spirit of democracy into this fine old church to an extent that it never dreamed of before, and it needs it quite as much as the crowd it seeks to serve may need the gospel.

A little dried-up Methodist church in an extreme southern state opened its doors to the forum with the result that the auditorium had to be enlarged three times in a few years and the church became the fifth largest of its denomination in the state. Finally it became necessary to build a big auditorium with a seating capacity of three thousand for the exclusive use of the forum and its various activities. A pastor of another denomination in the next town across the river had an evening congregation of about twenty-seven. He was afraid that the

afternoon session of the forum would draw away a few of his attendants, perhaps five or six. When asked which he would choose to suffer, the possible loss of six auditors, Sunday evening, or the shutting up of the forum on Sunday afternoons with an attendance not less than two thousand, he promptly said he would shut up the forum. Since the establishment of that forum, the Sunday evening congregations within a radius of ten miles of the forum auditorium have been augmented by two thousand attendants. This same minister declared it was his business to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and let the world take care of itself. I wonder if he was preaching Jesus' gospel and if it wasn't the gospel of Jesus that the forum there was disseminating.

And that reminds me of what William T. Ellis, the widely known religious journalist, once said about the forum at Ford Hall. He said, "I could easily imagine the Galilean on that Ford Hall platform, answering the eager, earnest questions of the perplexed multitude."

Intelligent people cherish the most widely divergent views about both democracy and religion. With some it is always a form, while with others it is purely idealistic and mystical. Most of us are able to recognize both democracy and religion when we see them in action. The forum is a vital force and its natural field of action is in the realm of practical democracy and sound religion, and it is at its best when it finds the two fields inevitably merging one into the other.

The forum cannot flourish where the instincts of the people are not democratic. The forum will get no foothold where the passion for truth and righteousness has been smothered out. America provides the two requisites and the forum flourishes on her soil. It is not ten years yet since the forum movement may be said to have gotten under way. It would be a bold prophet who would dare say what it will accomplish in the next generation as a contributing force to the democratization of religion.